

# Acknowledgement of Country

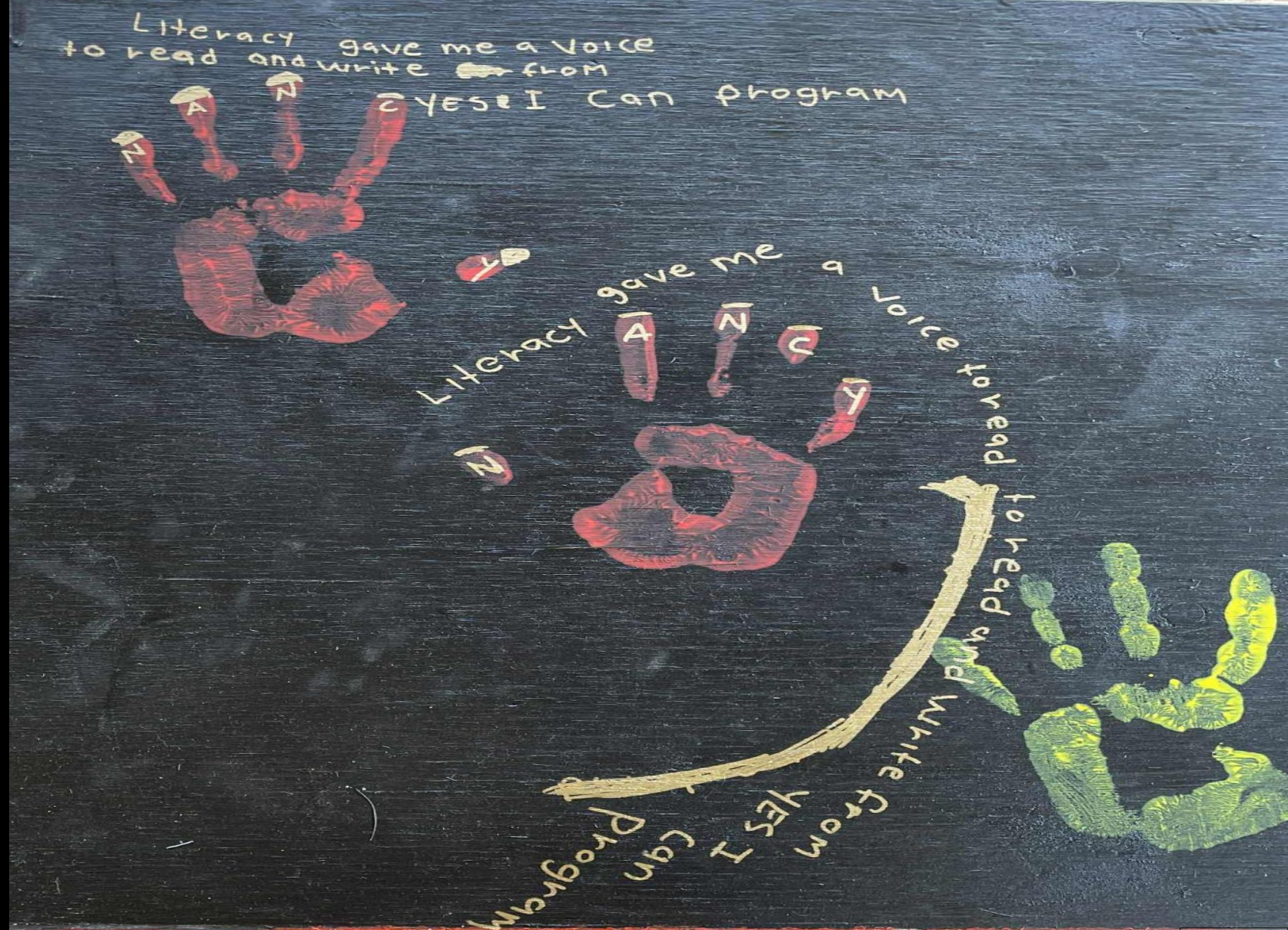
I acknowledge the Wurundjeri People on whose unceded lands we are on now and pay my respects to Wurundjeri Elders past and present.

I acknowledge the Warumungu People on whose unceded lands the research took place and pay my respects to Warumungu Elders past and present.

I extend my respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, and people from other global Indigenous contexts, here today, and pay respects to your Elders.

# Literacy and Voice:

## Understanding Political Participation in a First Nations Community-led Adult Literacy Campaign

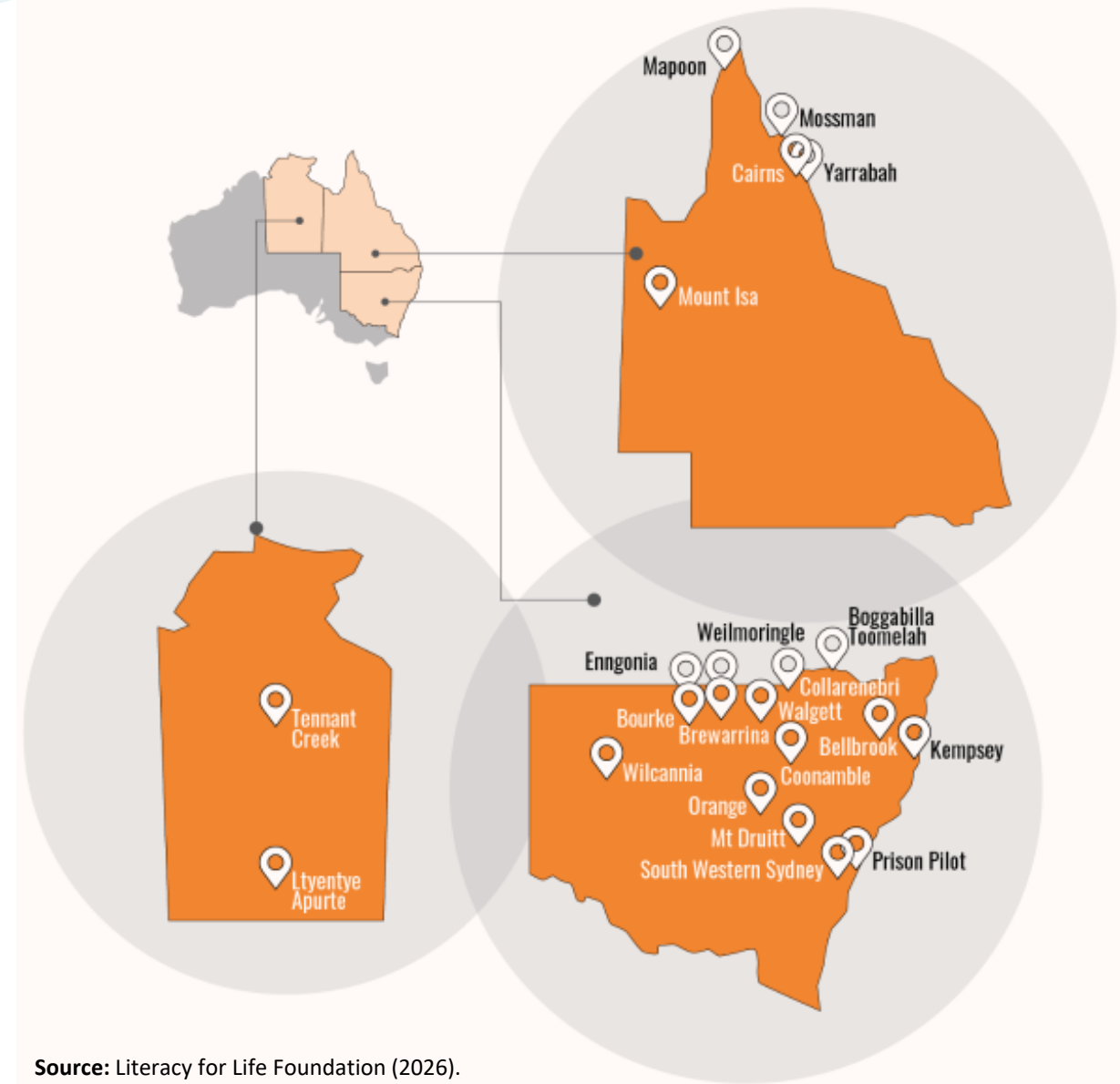


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# “Yes, I Can!” Adult Literacy Campaign

- “Yes, I Can!” (YIC) is based on a Cuban literacy approach adapted in **34 countries** to teach over **10 million** adults in **15 languages** (Boughton & Durnan, 2021; Lamrani, 2021).
- Since **2012**, YIC has run in **22 communities** in Australia, led by *Literacy for Life Foundation*.
- **550+** graduates and better outcomes than mainstream programs (Boughton et al., 2022; Guenther et al., 2017).



# The PhD Research Project

- One-year **critical ethnography** and **Participatory Action Research (PAR)** in Tennant Creek, a remote community in the Northern Territory (NT).



## Key question:

What is the relationship  
between adult literacy  
campaigns and political  
participation?

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of participants

Graduation Ceremony (December 2024)



# The Tennant Creek Literacy Campaign

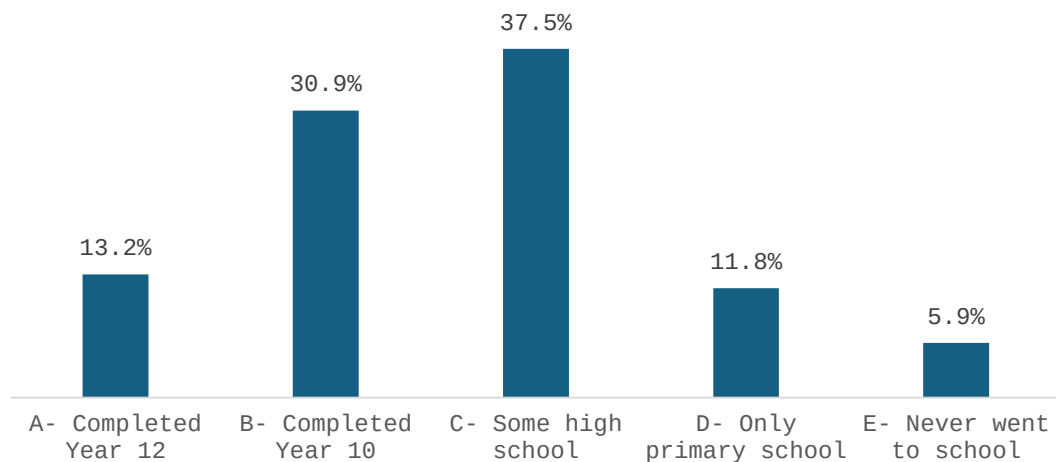
- Tennant Creek is a remote community in the Northern Territory with a population of 3,080 people (ABS, 2021).
- The community is on **Warumungu Country**, home to **14** First Nations language groups.
- From **2021-2024**, **158** adult learners participated, **80** graduated (**51%**).
- Ages ranged from **16–61** years old (average= **38**).

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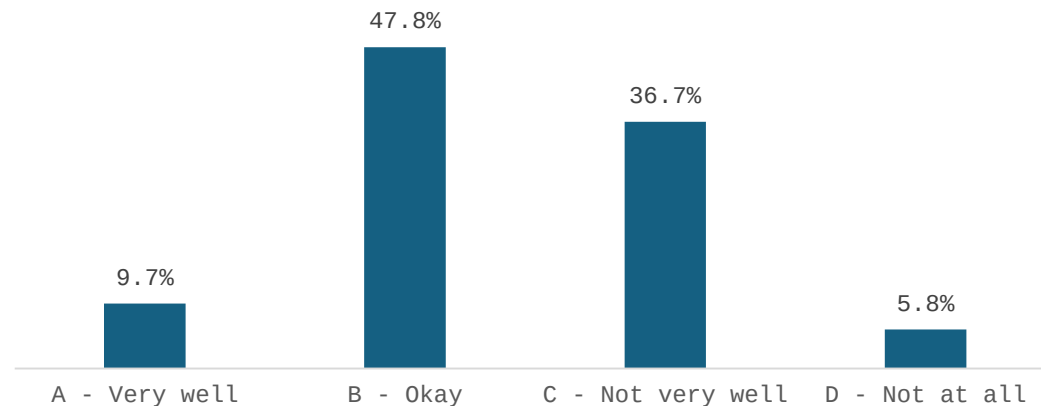
**Source:** Literacy for Life Foundation (2025).

# Literacy Campaign Classroom Data

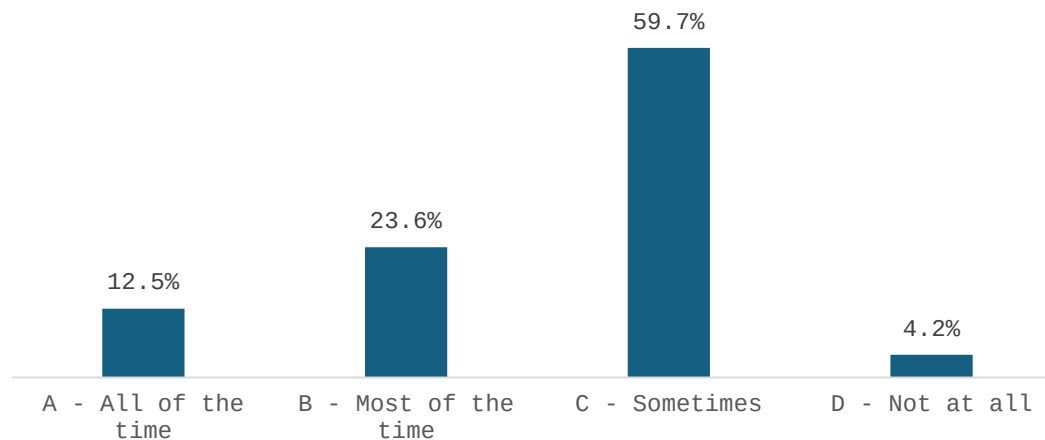
Formal schooling levels (n=204)



Self-assessed literacy levels (n=207)



Self-assessed English use (n=72)





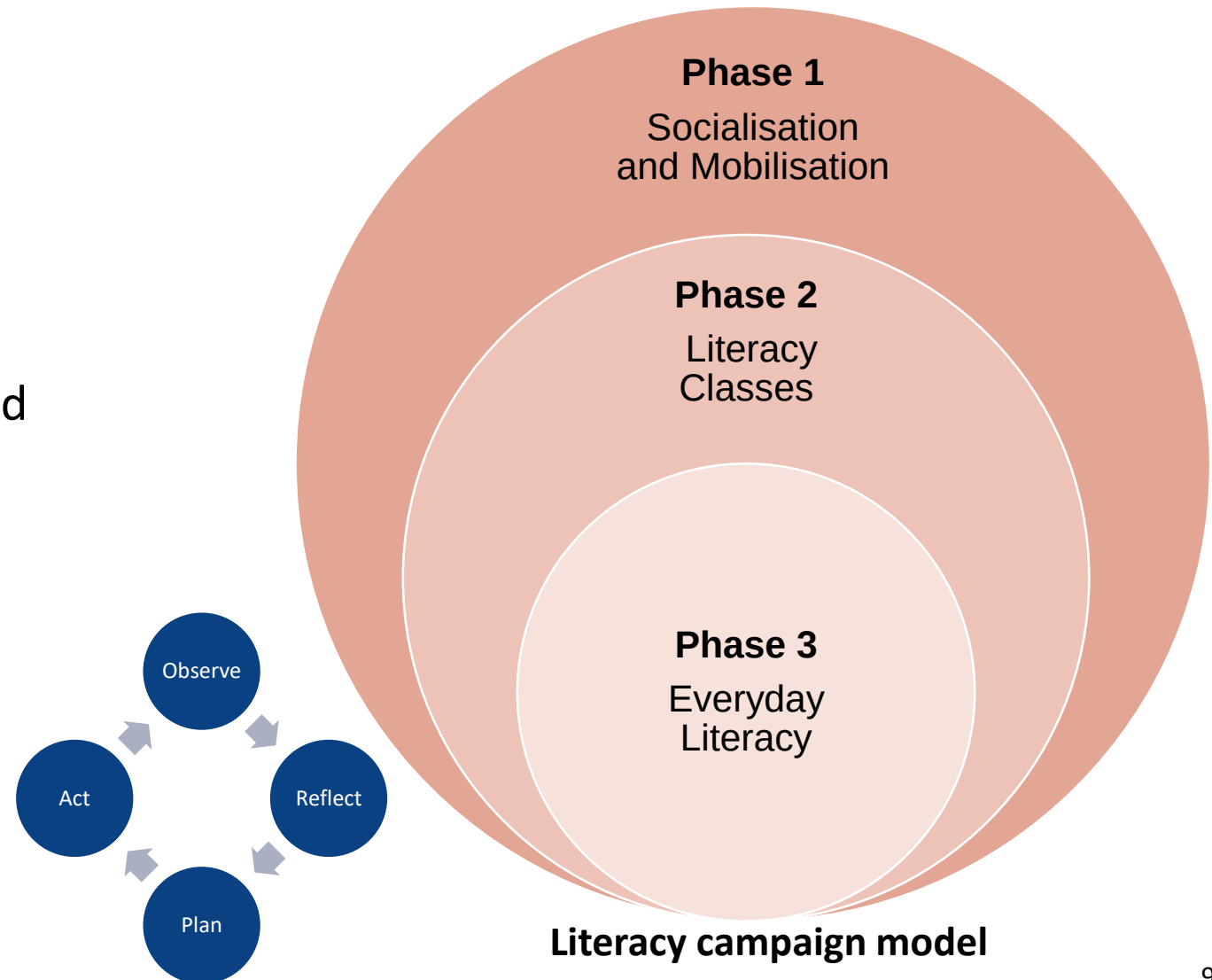
Total languages spoken  
(including Standard Australian  
English) = **24**

| Northern Territory                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                            |                                                                          | South Australia                                                         | Western Australia                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Barkly                                                                                                                                            | Central Desert                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Top End                                                                                                                                    | Western Desert                                                           | APY Lands                                                               | Western Desert                                                  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ali Curung</li> <li>• Elliott</li> <li>• Tennant Creek</li> <li>• Ti Tree</li> <li>• Willowra</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Areyonga</li> <li>• Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff)</li> <li>• Lajamanu</li> <li>• Mparntwe (Alice Springs)</li> <li>• Ntaria (Hermannsburg)</li> <li>• Papunya</li> <li>• Wallace Rockhole</li> <li>• Yuendumu</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Angurugu (Groote Eylandt)</li> <li>• Borroloola</li> <li>• Nhulunbuy</li> <li>• Wadeye</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kintore (Walungurru)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indulkana (Iwantja)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kiwirrkurra</li> </ul> |
| Total: 20                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                            |                                                                          |                                                                         |                                                                 |

In the classroom, people came from 20 different communities!

# PAR as Praxis in the Literacy Campaign

- The YIC literacy campaign model embeds “Southern PAR” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007).
- Informed by Latin American popular education, including Freirean pedagogy and critical literacy.
- *Sistematización de Experiencias*: A critical reflection process that translates lived experiences into shared knowledge and collective action (Holiday, 2018; Streck, 2008; Villa-Holguín, 2019).



# Aboriginal Participatory Action Research

- “PAR has an Indigenous history” (Dudgeon et al., 2020, p. 13).
- PAR emerged from the practices of Indigenous people developed to create flourishing communities through collective dialogue and action (Dudgeon et al., 2020; Erasmie & Dubell, 1980; Fals Borda, 1985; Weber-Pillwax, 2009).

## Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) Principles

Human rights and social justice

Community ownership

Community capacity building

Resilience focused

Empowerment and partnership

Respect for local knowledge

## Key Elements of APAR (Dudgeon et al., 2020, p. 19)

1. Involving Aboriginal co-researchers.
2. Respect for Indigenous people as experts-by-experience.
3. Indigenous leadership and governance.
4. Localised knowledge generation.
5. Community level feedback and dissemination.
6. The NHMRC Indigenous core values.
7. The Nine Guiding Principles of Social and Emotional wellbeing.

# Activist researchers

- Indigenous peoples have developed diverse research practices over millennia (Smith, 2022; Langton et al., 2024).
- YIC literacy campaign teachers are “activist researchers” (Kapoor & Jordan, 2009).

“They are referred to as project workers, community activists or consultants, anything but ‘researchers’. **They search and record, they select and interpret, they organize and re-present, they make claims on the basis of what they assemble. This is research.**” (Smith, 2022, p. 17)

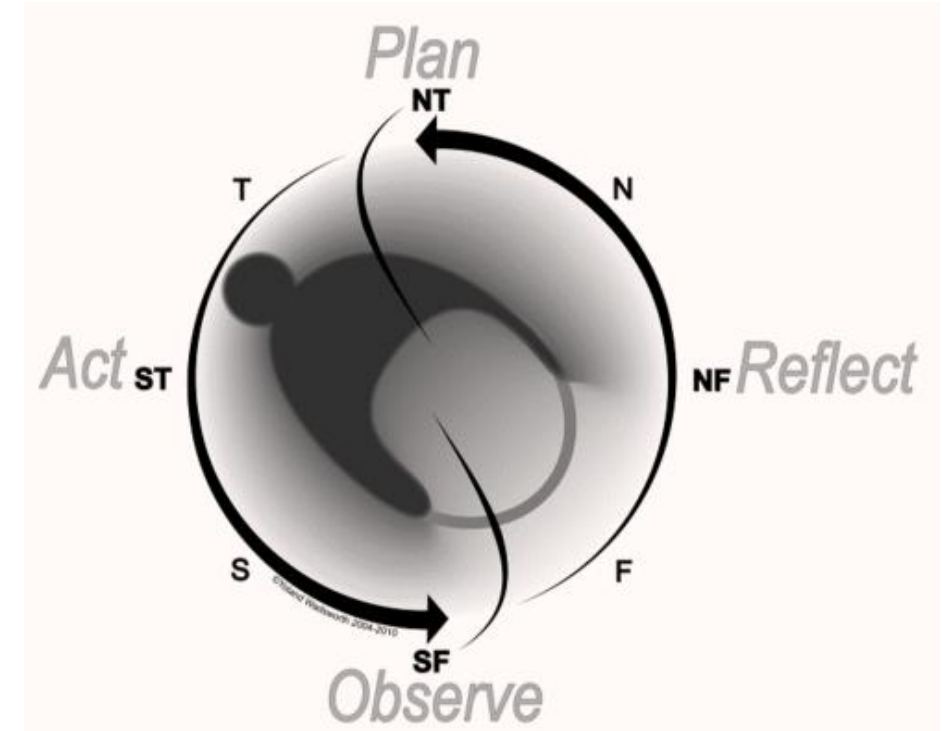
“In Aboriginal knowledge systems... **our community leaders and Elders and those who we choose to lead us are also researchers or reflective practitioners.**” (Rigney, 2024)

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Literacy campaign teacher CH

# Applying PAR in the Research Project

- **Planning activities** involving a *Search Conference* (Emery, 1999; Greenwood & Levin, 2011).
- **PAR workshops** focused on collectively identifying:
  - i. Forms of political participation
  - ii. Ways that low literacy can be a barrier to political participation
  - iii. Links between adult literacy and political participation
  - iv. Strategies/actions to strengthen political participation.
  - Used to plan literacy activities for the next campaign intake.
- Participants were co-researchers throughout, contributing to the development of the research and providing feedback.



Inquiry preference reach around the cycle  
(Wadsworth, 2015, p. 757).

# Understanding Political Participation

**Co-developed definition:** *Political participation* is about the actions people take to decide how to live together and change society.

## The Australian Political System

- Example:
- Electoral politics in the Northern Territory

## Land and Water Rights

- Example:
- Muckaty Station nuclear waste dump activism.

## Cultural Advocacy

- Example:
- Indigenous Language maintenance

## Community Advocacy

- Example:
- Community governance



Source: "muckaty 030" by Greens MPs, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

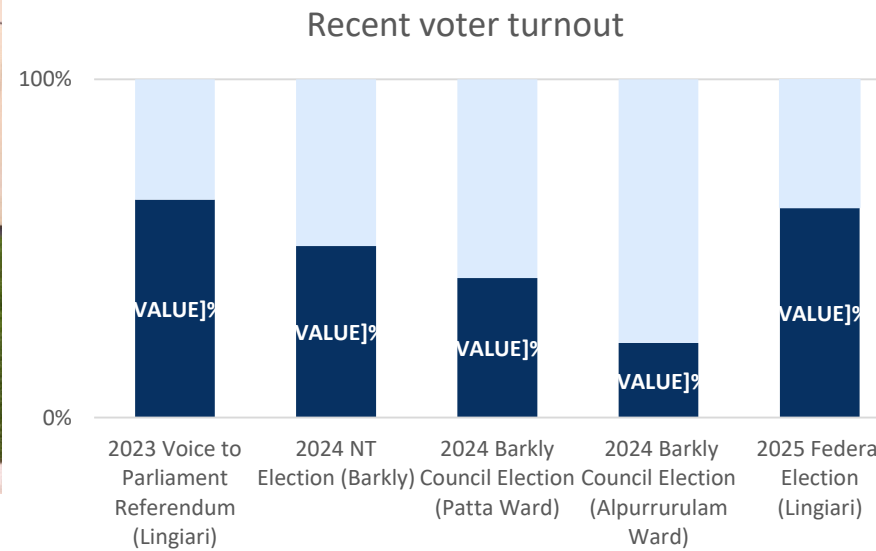
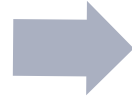


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# Adult literacy campaigns and political participation

## Knowledge and understanding

- Personal empowerment, political efficacy and participation
- *Power to* (Rowlands, 1997)



## Confidence and voice

- Personal empowerment, political efficacy and participation
- *Power from within* (Cornwall, 2016)



## Strong and active community

- Collective empowerment, political efficacy and participation
- *Power with, Power through* (Galie & Farnworth, 2021)

**“Literacy can be the key to everything... The word ‘politics’ makes me want to be more active.”**  
– Barkly Work Camp student

**“As they learn a bit more and read and write... they really started to come out of their shell. Attitudes will change with knowledge.”**  
– Darius Plummer, Campaign teacher

**“Literacy helps to decide for the community. Speak up for community. Build community. What we learn here we can take back to our community.”**  
– Barkly Work Camp student

# Reflections on the use of PAR

| Strengths                                                | Challenges                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Deeper, shared understanding of the issue.            | 1. Engaging the community                                               |
| 2. Personal and collective transformations.              | 2. Negotiating community and institutional demands and responsibilities |
| 3. Participating in meaningful action for social change. | 3. Practical considerations                                             |



# Conclusions

- The YIC campaign is an embodiment of **APAR**.
- We collectively defined a model of political participation consisting of four domains:

**Australian political system, land and water rights, cultural advocacy** and **community advocacy**.

- Adult literacy is linked to political participation in a threefold process:

**Knowledge and understanding, confidence and voice** and **strong and active community**.



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# Thank You!



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